



Exploring Speech Acts in Human Communication

Adelia Putri¹, Akhyar Rido², Elsa Ramadhany³
adelia_putri@teknokrat.ac.id¹, akhyar_rido@teknokrat.ac.id²,

English Department, Faculty of Arts and Education, Universitas
Teknokrat Indonesia^{1,2,3}

Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the function of speech actions in human communication with a primary focus on the theories of George Yule and John Langshaw Austin. It investigates how speech acts to conduct behaviors that influence social interaction in addition to serving as a means of communicating information. The study looks at the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, the three basic parts of speech acts, and shows how they function in everyday communication. The contextual needs for effective communication are demonstrated through an analysis of Austin's classification of illocutionary acts (verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives) and felicity conditions. With a focus on Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) and the function of indirect speech, Yule's classification of speech acts, which includes declaratives, expressives, commissives, representatives, and declaratives, is also examined in this paper. The study emphasizes the significance of speaker's aim, social context, and listener interpretation in attaining meaningful engagement in society. The results confirm that speech acts are essential to human communication because they allow people to express their feelings, form bonds with others, and use language to effect change.

Keywords: *George Yule, human communication, John Langshaw Austin, speech acts*



Introduction

The objective of this paper is to explore the communication of humans where words are used not only to present information but also to carry out actions. This paper focuses on how the way humans deliver words could have meaning inside since the main components of human communication are: statements, meanings, actions, which are the speech act units of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary (Geurts, 2019).

Speech acts occur beyond the borders of language in communication. In this context, Austin (2009), as cited in Bayat (2013), concentrates on the connection between communication and action. To communicate, people must be able to speak the language they have learned as well as possess the information necessary for employing it (Bayat, 2013). This suggests that when people communicate, they do more than just utter a string of words; they actually act. To put it another way, they either take action or force others to take action by utilizing the words they delivered and conveyed. One of the communication experts, Littlejohn and Foss (2010: 378) declared that, "Humans generate and apply meaning while evaluating experiences, and communication is unattainable without it".

As cited in Van Ruler (2020), Glare (1968) stated that the term communication originated from classical Latin, communicate, which means to share with, to share out, to make publicly accessible, or to discuss together. According to Katz (1966), cited in Bach (1979), the communication possessed by speakers encodes messages in the form of phonetic representations of speech. After this encoding serves as a signal for the speaker's articulatory organs, the speaker then utters the phrase with the correct phonetic contour. The listener's hearing organs then capture this. The sounds of speech that activate these organs are then converted into brain signals, which produce phonetic representations identical to those used by the speaker to convey their message. The listener's corresponding linguistic rule system decodes these representations into message representations identical to those originally intended by the speaker to be conveyed.

Communication is mostly about the process of meaning creation: how people construct meaning in psychological, social, and cultural contexts; how communications are interpreted cognitively; and how ambiguity develops and is addressed. Rather than providing a single definition, Littlejohn and Foss (2010) examine how communication fosters interpersonal relationships, transmits meaning, and permits social engagement over time and location. He also stated that human communication is seen as an essential and fundamental component of human existence, impacting every component of everyday interactions just as the speech acts' function within the communication itself.

According to Austin (1962) and Yule (1996), a speech act is an utterance that not only states a fact, but it is words that carry out actions. Resigning, promising, affirming, and asking are still considered speech acts in this understanding, but whispering, insulting, and persuading are not (Green, 2007). The potential of performing speech acts without using words or without stating that you are doing so is left open by this definition. The concept of communication is viewed as an essential two-way process that is

participative at all levels and interactive by nature (Van Ruler, 2020). This involves the paradigmatic change from the sender/receiver orientation into an actor orientation, in which all actors may be active and take initiatives within the communication (Van Ruler, 2020). In the theory of communicative action, Habermas (1984), cited in Eriksson (1999), stated that action situations where two or more social actors coordinate their speech acts and material (instrumental) activities to carry out their plans of action are referred to as social interactions.

In this case, the focus is on the flow of information, where this information is seen as objective. Therefore, when the information reaches the receiver, we can directly state that this is how successful communication happens. Furthermore, communication happens in society when two or more people engage and contribute to speak, listen, and take action, which is connected with speech acts. As stated by Austin and Yule, speech acts play an important role in human communication because they show how language functions not only to convey information but also to indicate actions.

Therefore, this conceptual paper explores how human communication is formed and occurs based on speech acts that have three related units: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary, and the functions as ties that are tailored one to another in order to create new purposes, which is the action. Thus, it is important to understand the context behind the speech acts since it has a big contribution to human communication.

Findings and Discussion

Austin's Speech Acts

John Langshaw Austin, a British philosopher, developed the study of language by proposing the idea of speaking actions, also known as speech acts, and became a framework that sees language not only as mere expressions when communicating but also as a medium that can be used to demonstrate action. Austin's statement, in which he considers language to not only express reality but also involve action, contradicts traditional philosophy, which holds that the purpose of language and communication is to explain situations and determine right and wrong. For example, sentences such as "I apologize," "I promise," and "I swear" are not just words, but also demand action after they are uttered by the speaker.

In his 1962 book entitled "How to Do Things with Words," Austin further explains speech acts, in which there are three interconnected levels involved in every act of communication. First, the locutionary act, which means the act of uttering meaningful words that contain the speaker's expression. For example, when someone says, "It's very cold here," it shows the actual meaning. Second, illocutionary acts are the intentions or purposes behind a statement or question uttered by the speaker. In the previous example, the speaker may have intended for someone to close the window or turn on the heater. Finally, there are perlocutionary acts, which refer to the effects of speech on the listener or the actions expected after the speaker's statement.

Austin also explains the classification of illocutionary acts based on five types of functions performed. The following Table 1 shows the five types of illocutionary acts according to Austin.

Table 1. Types of Illocutionary Acts (Austin, 1962)

Types	Description	Examples
Verdictives	Delivering a finding, assessment, or verdict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Estimate ● Assess ● Describe
Exercitives	Exercising power, making decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Command ● Warn ● Appoint
Commisives	Committing to a course of action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promise ● Guarantee ● Vow
Behabitives	Expressing attitudes or reactions to others' behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Thank ● Apologize ● Congratulate
Expositives	Clarifying reasons, arguments, or explanations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Affirm ● Inform ● Report

In addition, to ensure that speech acts are successful, he developed the theory of felicity requirements, or what he called “felicitous.” For performative utterances to be successful, several contextual and social conditions must be met. According to Austin, three conditions must be met: the speaker’s sincere intention, the existence of traditional and recognized procedures, and the correct implementation of procedures by the parties involved. For example, an agreement is only valid and binding if the speaker genuinely intends to fulfill it, and it is uttered at the appropriate time and place where the listener can receive and consider it a promise as well. Take a look at Table 2 below.

Table 2. Felicity Conditions in Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962)

Types	Description	Examples
Conventionality	There must be an accepted conventional procedure, and the context and participants must be appropriate.	A judge saying “I sentence you” in a courtroom is valid; the same phrase by a random person is not.
Actuality	The conventional procedure must be executed properly and	A wedding ceremony is invalid if one person fails to say “I do.”

	completely by all parties involved.	
Intentionality	The speaker must genuinely intend to perform the act and have the appropriate thoughts or feelings.	An apology is not successful if spoken sarcastically or without sincerity.

These situations demonstrate the close relationship between context, language, and the speaker’s purpose in effective communication. Austin’s layered approach shows clearly that language is more than just stating facts and exchanging information, but language can also be used to achieve specific goals and solve problems. It really works when the words and sentences we speak fit the situation, social norms, and sincerity. This concept provides a significant change to the rules of philosophy, linguistics, and communication studies by emphasizing the role of language in everyday interactions. Austin also sheds light on our understanding of communication by showing that speech is action as well.

Yule’s Speech Acts

George Yule (1996) explains that speech acts can be described as expressions that carry out actions. These statements have practical purposes in communication, not just statements of fact. Some of these actions are usually recognized by using certain words such as apologies, complaints, compliments, promises, requests, and invitations. When someone speaks, they not only create a series of words or phrases but also perform an action or actions. Three actions that are interrelated and commonly used to achieve a goal, according to Yule, are acts of locution, illocution, and perlocution.

According to Yule, the locutionary act is the first category that is the foundation for making a meaningful linguistic expression using syntactic and semantic principles. Simply put, a locutionary act is an act of speaking with clear meaning and reference, focusing on the literal and surface meaning of a sentence, regardless of the intended effect or purpose for the listener. For example, when someone says, “It’s cold in here”, it means that the temperature is so low that the room is cold.

The second category is the illocutionary act, which summarizes the communicative intent or meaning of the sentence uttered by the speaker. Illocutionary acts such as requesting, promising, warning, or informing are reflected in this. Yule categorizes illocutionary acts into five types, each of which describes a function in communication. Please refer to Table 3 below.

Table 3. Types of Illocutionary Acts (Yule, 1996)

Types	Description	Examples
Directive	Speaker tries to get the hearer to do something	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Requesting ● Commanding
Expressive	Speaker expresses their feelings or attitudes about a situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Thanking ● Apologizing

Commissive	Speaker commits to a future action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promising ● Offering
Representative	Speaker commits to the truths of the expressed proposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stating ● Claiming ● Reporting
Declarative	Speaker’s statement as a spoken action that affects the external environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Declaring ● Resigning

The third category is perlocutionary acts, which means the effect that an expression has on the listener. It focuses on what happens as a result of saying something, such as persuading, entertaining, amusing, or frightening someone. For example, if someone says, “Can you tell me where the museum is?” The illocutionary act is the question itself, the locutionary act is the purpose behind the question (to get information), and the perlocutionary act is how the listener responds. They may point, be confused, or ignore the question. This shows how language has social power. According to Yule, perlocutionary acts show that communication is not just about intent, but also about how words affect others. This shows how language has social power and why understanding context is key to successful communication.

In addition, Yule also discusses the difference between direct and indirect speech acts. A direct speech act is one in which the form of the utterance and its meaning are the same. For example, imperative language such as “Close the door” clearly functions as a command, while declarative sentences such as “It’s hot outside” clearly state a fact. These utterances can be easily translated or interpreted in a given situation with clear speaker intent.

Whereas, indirect speech acts occur when the intent and literal meaning of a sentence differ. In some situations, a simple statement about the weather, for example, “It’s hot outside” can be a code for opening a window or turning on the air conditioner. To understand these signals or codes, the listener must use context understanding, basic knowledge, and interpretation skills. Although indirect speech acts are often smoother, they can still be misunderstood if the listener does not catch the intent implied in the speaker’s sentence.

Furthermore, Yule emphasizes that speech acts are closely related to social situations, and for smooth communication in these settings, both the intent of the speaker and the ability of the listener to understand the intent are crucial. To help with this, Yule introduces “Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices” or IFIDs, his idea that indicates what kind of speech act is being used. These can be words, tone, sentence structure, or even gestures, and help the listener know the intent of the speaker.

One common type of IFIDs is the ‘explicit performative verb’, words like promise, apology, warning, invitation, or congratulation, which very clearly state the intention of the speaker. For example, a sentence like, “I promise to return your book tomorrow,” the phrase ‘promise’ makes it very clear that the speaker is serious and making a commitment to the listener as well as to himself. Other IFIDs include sentence mood, word stress, and structure. For example, “Are you coming?” with a high tone of voice



sounds like a question, while with the same sentence but with a low tone, it could be a statement or assumption by the speaker. Modal verbs such as ‘can,’ ‘should,’ or ‘may,’ also imply different intentions. In the sentence, “Can you turn on the air conditioning?” is formed like a question but functions as a polite request. In writing, punctuation and concepts help play the same role.

These cues, along with social knowledge, can help people understand what is actually being said, even when it is not actually stated directly or implied. Ultimately, IFIDs help bridge the gap between the literal meaning of words and the implied intent of the speaker. Yule points out that speech acts are not simply stated statements, but they are meaningful social actions that are shaped by language and the situations in which they occur.

In everyday interactions, humans use speech acts to form relationships with others, establish and enforce social norms, and achieve practical goals, such as making requests, offering help, apologizing, or giving compliments. Therefore, understanding speech acts is essential to understanding how communication functions effectively in a social context since speech acts become a foundation of human communication in order to make the communication connected, have a purpose and meaning, and have a clear context.

Conclusion

This paper explains how speech act theory is involved in understanding human communication, not just as a means of expressing statements or words, but also as a means of demanding action. Based on the theory introduced by John Langshaw Austin and further developed by George Yule, this paper explores the concept of speech acts in human communication and how expressions can function to request, promise, warn, or state something that demands action from the listener, depending on the speaker's intent and the context in which the communication occurs. Austin introduced the basic concept of speech act theory, which consists of three interrelated components: locution, illocution, and perlocution. He also explained that speech acts can only be successful if certain social conditions are met, such as conventionality, actuality, and intentionality. Yule further developed this theory by providing a classification that is easier to understand, use, and access according to its function. For example, at the illocutionary level, there are commands, expressions, promises, representations, and statements, making these concepts easy to apply in everyday communication.

In addition, Yule also developed his idea about the difference between direct and indirect speech acts and explained the function of Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), where the theory can be used to interpret the speaker's intentions and objectives. These aspects, from structure to intonation, show how important it is to interpret context in communication. This idea also provides further insight that communication is not merely about the accuracy of a sentence or its literal meaning, but also about the speaker's intended purpose and the listener's ability to understand. Both Austin's and Yule's theories open up the possibility of viewing communication as a social act with interrelated layers that can shape meaning, relationships, and human interaction. It can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Comparison Between Austin and Yule’s Speech Act Theory

Aspect	John Langshaw Austin	George Yule
Core Ideas	Language performs actions through three layers of communication: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary.	Emphasized three levels of speech acts such as locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts and expanded the idea about context, direct/indirect speech acts, as well as the role of IFIDs.
Key Concept	Language as action	Pragmatic Function in Communication.
Application Focus	Abstract, analytical, and philosophical	Practical, accessible, and learner-friendly.
Implication for Understanding Speech Acts	Introduced speech act theory by proofing how speaking is a form of acting depending on the context, intention, as well as the situation where the communication occurs.	Makes speech act theory more accessible for real-world use by emphasizing the interpretation and social interaction.

To conclude, speech act theory, particularly as proposed by Austin and developed by Yule, can help us understand that language is more than just a collection of words or sentences; it is also an action. Every time we speak, we may be making a promise, giving a warning, or asking for help. Austin and Yule also highlight the importance of context and meaning in communication. Ultimately, by studying speech act theory in human communication, we can better understand how expressions work and use them to express ourselves and understand others in our daily lives.

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